

50 Zen Koans: The Gateless Gate to Insight

Zen **koans** are short, paradoxical anecdotes or questions used in Zen Buddhism to provoke deep reflection and awaken insight beyond logical reasoning. A classic koan often features an encounter between a student and a master where the master's response is unexpected or seemingly nonsensical. Koans are not riddles with trick answers; instead, each koan is a **“Gateless Gate”** – a barrier that the logical mind cannot pass. Only by **dropping analytical thinking** and engaging one's whole being can one penetrate a koan and experience a shift in consciousness. As 18th-century master Hakuin Ekaku described, *“From the very beginning all beings are Buddha... It is like water and ice... Stop the movement to grasp or reject and behold: the water flows clear and freely”* – a poetic summary of the koan spirit of letting go and directly seeing reality.

Koans emerged within the **Chán/Zen tradition** of China during the Tang and Song dynasties (7th–13th centuries) and were later transmitted to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. **Koan practice** involves contemplating these stories during meditation or daily activities, often under guidance of a teacher. The seemingly illogical responses of the masters are designed to **frustrate the discursive mind** and force the student to **turn inward**, smashing conventional dualistic thinking. The great Zen teacher Wumen (Mumon) said one must *“pass through the barrier of the ancients”* to realize enlightenment. In koan practice, **great doubt and**

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great faith work together – as the student's habitual thinking gets tied in knots, a breakthrough becomes possible.

Classic Collections of Koans

Over generations, Zen teachers compiled **koan collections** with commentary to aid students. Three of the most famous are **The Gateless Gate (Mumonkan)** , **The Blue Cliff Record (Hekiganroku)** , and **The Book of Equanimity (Shōyōroku)** :

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The Gateless Gate – compiled in 1228 by Chinese master **Wumen Huikai** (Mumon Ekai). It contains 48 koans (plus one added later), each with Wumen’s commentary and verse. The title “*Gateless Gate*” indicates that the only barriers to enlightenment are our own attachments. Wumen’s cases include famous dialogues like “*Joshu’s Dog*” , “*Mu*” , and “*Nansen Cuts the Cat*” . Wumen’s brief commentaries are often wry or poetic, designed to jolt the reader’s mind into a new perspective.

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The Blue Cliff Record – a 12th-century collection of 100 koans, expanded from earlier compilations by master **Yuanwu Keqin** . The Blue Cliff Record includes extensive commentary and verse for each case . These koans are drawn from the golden age of Zen in Tang/Song China and feature many renowned masters. The Blue Cliff is known for its literary elegance and subtle, layered analysis – in fact, it was once suppressed for fear monks would intellectualize its poetry instead of directly realize the truth. Nevertheless, it remains a treasure trove of Zen wisdom, including koans like “*Every Day Is a Good Day*” , “*The Highest Meaning of the Holy Truths*” (Bodhidharma’s encounter with Emperor Wu), and Layman Pang’s stories.

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The Book of Equanimity – also known as the Book of Serenity, compiled by **Wansong Xingxiu** in the 12th century. It contains 100

koans (with some overlap with the Blue Cliff) and emphasizes
balanced, 1

peaceful reflection – hence “equanimity.” Each case is accompanied by verses by earlier master Hongzhi. The Book of Equanimity includes cases such as “*The World Honored One (Buddha) Points to the Ground*” , “*Jizo’s Most Intimate*” , and “*Rinzai’s True Person*” . It is valued in the Sōtō Zen school for its gentle yet profound approach.

Each of these collections became a classic, studied by monks and lay practitioners alike. In the Rinzai Zen tradition (especially in Japan), a teacher might assign koans sequentially to trainees – starting with a “**first barrier**” koan like *Mu* or “*What is the sound of one hand?*” , then moving through dozens or even hundreds of koans over years of training. In Sōtō Zen, koans are not assigned in the same way, but they still inform teachings and are reflected upon during zazen (sitting meditation) or in daily life stories.

Koans are “**alive**” – not mere texts to be parsed, but encounters to be experienced anew by each practitioner. There is a saying that “*a koan is not answered, it answers you.*” In working with koans, one isn’t **solving** a puzzle so much as allowing the koan to work on one’s own tightly held perspectives. A genuine response to a koan comes not from the intellect but from one’s whole being, often spontaneously. It could manifest as a word, a gesture, a deep bow – or simply a fundamental shift in understanding. The **commentaries** and **verses** provided by the classic koan collections are there not to explain the koan’s “solution” (indeed, any such explanation could spoil it), but to point towards the state of mind of the masters and to inspire the adept. They often use allusions, poetry, or humor to *hint* at the deeper meaning.

Below, we explore **100 traditional Zen koans** drawn from the Mumonkan, Blue Cliff Record, Book of Equanimity, and other classic Zen lore. For each koan, we present the original story or exchange (in English translation), give a bit of **historical/spiritual context** about the teachers or setting, and offer a brief **commentary or interpretation** to illuminate the key insight or paradox. These koans are not meant to be “understood” in a conventional way – rather, let their images and words resonate beyond reason. As Wumen said in his preface to *The Gateless Gate* , “*If you do not pass the barrier and do not shatter your illusions, you will remain a ghost clinging to bushes and grasses.*” But if you **step through the gateless gate** , even the most ordinary moment – hearing the rain drip, seeing a flower bloom, washing your bowl – can reveal ultimate truth.

One Hundred Zen Koans (with Context and Commentary)

Below is a curated list of 100 classic Zen koans. They span the early Chinese masters (6th–10th century), the golden age of Zen (Tang/Song dynasties), and a few later and modern anecdotes that have entered Zen teaching. Each koan is titled by a distinguishing phrase or subject. The context notes the protagonist master (and era, if known) or source, and the **commentary** highlights the paradox or insight. Many of these koans appear in the aforementioned collections, indicated in parentheses for reference (GG = Gateless Gate, BCR = Blue Cliff Record, EQ = Book of Equanimity). Whether a koan is encountered in formal practice or casual reading, it can serve as a “**finger pointing at the moon**” – do not fixate on the finger (the words), but look to the moon (your own direct experience)!

1.

Joshu's "Mu" (Zhaozhou's Dog) – *Context:* Master **Zhaozhou Congshen** (Joshu, 778–897) was asked by a monk, “Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?” Traditionally Buddhist doctrine says all beings

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have Buddha-nature, but Joshu replied: “ **Mu** ” (Chinese for “No” or “Not”) . *Commentary:* This is the famous **Mu Koan** , Case #1 of the *Gateless Gate* . *Mu* is not a literal “no.” It is said to be Joshu’s “**one word barrier**” – presenting the monk with a negation so absolute that his mind stops. *Wumen’s* commentary says if you engage with *Mu* wholeheartedly, “it is like swallowing a red-hot iron ball”

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that you can neither vomit nor digest . The koan “Mu” is given to novices to precipitate an awakening. One must become **completely one with Mu** – to absorb oneself in the “**No-thingness**” it represents. When all dualistic thinking (yes/no, dog/Buddha, self/other) is exhausted, the barrier of *Mu* shatters and one directly perceives Buddha-nature. As *Wumen’s* verse puts it: “*Has a dog Buddha nature? / This is the most serious question of all. / If you say yes or no / You lose your own Buddha nature.*” . In practice, *Mu* becomes a **mantra of emptiness** – not an answer to the monk’s

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question, but a tool to destroy clinging and reveal **the boundless “No-thing”** that is form and emptiness itself.

Hyakujo's Fox (The Wild Fox) – *Context:* **Pai-chang Huai-hai** (Hyakujo, 720–814) once gave a talk 2.

and an old man lingered after the assembly. He revealed he was not a man at all but a **wild fox** in disguise. In ancient times, he had been a Zen master who answered a student's question "Does an enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect?" by saying "No, such a person is free from karma." Because of this *one wrong answer*, he was condemned to live as a fox for 500 lifetimes. He beseeched Hyakujo, "Please save me from the fox's body by a turning word." Hyakujo then asked him the same question, and the old man answered, "**An enlightened person is not blind to cause and effect.**" Hearing this, the old fox was liberated – he bowed and said, "*I am freed from the fox body*" , ⁶⁷

then passed away, and Hyakujo had the fox given a monk's funeral . (Case in *Gateless Gate* #2 and *Blue Cliff Record* #8.) *Commentary:* This koan addresses the relationship between **enlightenment and karma** . The first master thought enlightenment put one "above" cause-and-effect (perhaps meaning the enlightened are no longer bound by past karma). But in Zen understanding, enlightenment does not **magically exempt** one from the laws of the universe – rather, it means one is **fully aware** of cause and effect and thus no longer creates negative karma. As Hyakujo says, the enlightened person "*is not blind to causation.*" The old master's original answer "does not fall under cause-and-effect" was a dualistic trap – implying some separation between *absolute* enlightenment and *relative* causality. For that, he "became a fox." Hyakujo's corrected answer reunifies absolute and relative – the enlightened person **lives in harmony with the law of cause and effect** (neither ignoring it nor being controlled by it). Upon hearing this truth, the fox (a symbol of someone stuck in a doctrinal error) is released. This koan also reminds us that **words matter** – even a Zen master can distort the Dharma with a careless phrase. Wumen's verse warns that "*Not falling under causation, why was he a fox? / Not ignoring causation, why was he released from the fox?*" The paradox is resolved only when we see that **freedom is not**

escape from reality but intimate accord with it. In practical terms: a Zen adept still experiences life's ups and downs, but with clear awareness and responsibility.

3.

Gutei's One Finger – *Context:* Master **Gutei** (Judi, 9th century) responded to every question about Zen by simply **raising one finger** . He had a young attendant, a boy, who would imitate his one finger Zen. One day a visitor asked the boy, “What is your master’s teaching?” The boy held up one finger, just as Gutei would. When Gutei heard of this, he **cut off the boy’s finger with a knife** ! The boy ran away screaming. Gutei called out to him; as the boy turned his head, Gutei **held up his own index finger** . In that instant the boy attained awakening . *Commentary:* This shocking koan

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(Gateless Gate #3) illustrates the danger of **imitation without realization** , and the compassion sometimes hidden in drastic actions. Gutei’s signature teaching was conveyed entirely in a simple gesture – one finger pointing up. That one finger stands for “**One**” – the **one reality** beyond duality, or the “One Mind.” But the little monk merely **aped the form** without the inner experience. By cutting off the boy’s finger, Gutei did something extreme to jolt him out of complacency. It was a **severe compassion** – as Wumen comments, “*Gutei indeed attained Gutei’s Zen, carrying it out on his own disciple*” . The moment after the cut, Gutei’s raising of his finger (now the boy had none to raise) 3

created an enlightenment trigger. The **boy’s mind completely stopped** – in that gap, he directly realized the **One** that Gutei’s finger had always pointed to. The koan’s bloody imagery startles us even now:

can such cruelty be “Zen”? One must understand the symbols – **cutting off the finger** represents cutting off attachment (in this case, attachment to a teaching device or to borrowed understanding). With *nothing to imitate*, the boy saw **directly**. It’s said that afterward Gutei would weep gratefully, saying “ *I got this one-finger Zen from my teacher Tenryu, and I used it freely all my life but never really understood it until now.* ” In Zen training, the **master may use drastic methods** (shouts, blows, etc.) to sever the student’s clinging. The koan asks us: What is that “**One**” which remains when all fingers (and all concepts) are cut off? If you say it, you miss it. If you don’t say it, you ignore it. (Perhaps you should just hold up a finger!) **Bodhidharma Faces the Wall** – *Context: Bodhidharma*, the semi-legendary Indian monk who 4.

brought Chán (Zen) to China around 520 CE, is renowned for his wordless teaching. In one story, he had an audience with **Emperor Wu** of Liang, a devout Buddhist. The Emperor proudly told Bodhidharma of all the temples and sutras he had sponsored and asked, “What merit is there in these deeds?” Bodhidharma replied, “No merit at all.” The Emperor, taken aback, then asked, “What is the highest holy truth?”

Bodhidharma said, “Vast emptiness, nothing holy.” The Emperor, perplexed, 9 finally asked, “Who is it that stands before me?” Bodhidharma coolly answered, “**I don’t know.**” . He eventually left the court and went to Shaolin Monastery, where he sat in meditation **facing a wall for nine years** . *Commentary:* This famous encounter (Blue Cliff Record Case 1) sets the tone for Zen’s **direct pointing** . Emperor Wu expected praise for his virtuous works, but Bodhidharma cut through **attachment to merit** : good deeds yield blessings in relative terms, but true merit in the absolute sense is empty – doing good should be its own reward, not a basis for ego. When asked about the highest truth of Buddhism, Bodhidharma answered with the language of **formless reality** : “*vast emptiness, nothing sacred.*” He was pointing the

Emperor beyond worldly piety to **śūnyatā** (emptiness) – the idea that even Buddhist concepts of “holiness” are empty of inherent nature.

Finally, “**Who are you?**” is the fundamental question of Zen.

Bodhidharma’s “*I don’t know*” is not ignorance; it is the “**Great Doubt**” that cuts off any fixed identity. He stands in the “**don’t-know mind**,” the state of not clinging to labels – in that openness, one’s true nature (which is beyond ¹⁰

name or rank) can manifest . Bodhidharma then sat facing a wall for years – legends say his **resolve** was so strong that his shadow was imprinted on the rock. Eventually a monk, Dazu Huike, came seeking his teaching. To show sincerity, Huike supposedly **cut off his own arm** and said, “My mind is not at peace, please pacify it.” Bodhidharma replied, “Bring me your mind and I will pacify it.” Huike said, “I have searched, and I cannot grasp it.” Bodhidharma replied, “**There – I have pacified your mind.**” In that moment, Huike awakened . This second part (Gateless Gate #41)

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complements the first: after Bodhidharma’s cold “*I don’t know*” comes the warm **assurance of peace** – when Huike realizes the mind cannot be located as a thing, his restless seeking stops. **Bodhidharma’s “no knowing” becomes Huike’s knowing of No-Mind.** Together, these Bodhidharma koans teach that ultimate truth is grasped only when all our merits, ideas, and even our sense of self are let go into *vast emptiness* – then the mind is pacified, and even a one-armed Zen adept can sleep peacefully.

5.

The Buddha Twirls a Flower – *Context:* The earliest Zen story in lineage legend. Once, on **Vulture Peak** , **Shakyamuni Buddha** gave a

wordless sermon. He simply held up (or twirled) a **flower** before ¹² the assembly. All the monks were silent; only **Mahākāśyapa** broke into a smile . Seeing this, the

Buddha said: *“I possess the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of nirvana, the real form of no-form... It is not transmitted by words but specially communicated outside of scriptures. I now entrust it to 4 Mahākāśyapa.”* Thus Mahākāśyapa became Buddha’s successor in Zen lore. *Commentary:* This story (Case 6 in the Gateless Gate, sometimes called “*Kashyapa’s Smile*”) illustrates the claimed origin of Zen’s “**mind to mind transmission**” beyond words. Whether or not it literally occurred, its symbolism is rich. The Buddha’s **silent holding of a flower** represents reality “*such as it is,*” without explanation. The monks’ silence perhaps indicates confusion – they did not see . But Mahākāśyapa saw the point and smiled. What did he see? **Thusness** – the flower in Buddha’s hand was “**just thus.**” In that moment, Mahākāśyapa’s mind and Buddha’s mind were one, without any intermediary of language. The Buddha recognized that Mahākāśyapa had directly grasped the **inexpressible essence** (often called the “**Treasury of the True Dharma Eye**”). This koan highlights that Zen teaching is not primarily in words or sutras but in direct indication of mind. A later verse says: *“Holding up a flower, the Buddha betrayed our ignorance; / Kashyapa’s smile opened the subtle secret.”* The “subtle secret” is nothing mysterious – it is simply the **suchness** of a flower, of a smile, of *this moment* . But to awaken to it, one must become like Mahākāśyapa: without clinging to reason or scriptural authority, **open and present** . In Zen training, a teacher might give a “**flower**” or any simple object to a student and demand a response. If the student parrots philosophy, it misses the living truth. But perhaps a student might gently take the flower and **sniff its fragrance** , fully responsive – that might be a contemporary

Kashyapa's smile . As the Zen saying goes, “*Not a single word has been spoken, and the truth has been revealed.*”

6.

Nansen's “Ordinary Mind Is the Way” – *Context:* A monk named **Zhaozhou (Joshu)** – yes, the same Joshu who would later teach “Mu” – as a young man asked his teacher **Nansen** (Nanquan, 748–834), “What is the *Tao* (the Way)?” Nansen replied, “**Ordinary mind is the Tao.**” Joshu asked, “Then should I direct myself toward it?” Nansen said, “If you try to direct yourself, you go away from it.” Joshu protested, “But if we do not try, how can we know the Way?” Nansen answered, “**The Way is not about knowing or not knowing. Knowing is delusion; not knowing is blankness. When you truly reach the genuine Way, it is like vast space – clear and void. You cannot force it one way or ^{13 14} the other.**” Hearing this, Joshu was enlightened . *Commentary:* This luminous koan (Gateless Gate #19, also in Book of Equanimity) presents **great wisdom in plain speech**. Joshu earnestly wanted to know how to attain the Tao – the fundamental truth. Nansen directs him back to the **ordinary, present mind** . The “*ordinary mind*” in Chinese (**pingchang xin**) does not mean a wandering, unenlightened mind; it means the mind **right here and now** , in its natural, uncontrived state. “**The Way is ordinary mind.**” This is a profound teaching: enlightenment is not a special state somewhere else – it is realized by *fully being in whatever state you are in now* . Joshu then asks if he should *aim* for it. The more he *seeks* it as an object or goal, the further he estranges himself from his own mind. Nansen further explains that the true Way is **beyond intellection** (knowing) but also

beyond obtuse ignorance (blank not-knowing). It's not an **idea** to figure out, nor just an **absence** of ¹⁵ thought. It's as open and boundless as the sky – you can't grasp it by cleverness nor by dullness . Upon this, Joshu had a breakthrough. We can imagine that his mind – which had been striving and churning – suddenly let go into the **vast space of “ordinary mind.”** *He* stopped trying to direct the mind, and thus he directly experienced the Way. This koan reminds us that in Zen, one does not abandon daily life to find the Way – **daily life is** the Way. As another Zen saying goes: “*Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.*” The difference is one's perspective – seeing the sacred in the ordinary. Nansen's words are very practical for us: when we are chasing after some “*special*” realization, we overlook the **miracle of the present moment** . When we are sunk in confusion or passivity, we also miss it. The Way is subtle – it requires us to be **alert yet at ease** , neither grasping nor avoiding. When we manage that, even for a moment, the “*ordinary*” appears as **extraordinary** . (Joshu, who attained this insight, went on to live to age 119 and

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became one of the greatest Zen masters, famed for one-word answers that pointed directly to *ordinary mind*.)

7.

Great Master Ma Is Ill (“Sun-Faced Buddha, Moon-Faced Buddha”) – *Context: Mazu Daoyi* (Ma-tsu or “Master Ma,” 709–788) was a towering Zen master known for vigorous methods

(shouting, striking) and bold teachings. In his old age he fell sick. A monk asked him, “Master, how are you ¹⁶ feeling these days?” Mazu answered, **“Sun-Faced Buddha, Moon-Faced Buddha.”** . *Commentary:* Mazu was referencing a line from the *Nirvana Sutra* describing Buddhas with long or short lifespans. A “Sun-Faced Buddha” lives for 1800 years; a “Moon-Faced Buddha” survives only one day and night ¹⁷

. So when asked about his illness, Mazu poetically identified himself with both – implying that he was completely at peace with either outcome. **If he recovered and lived long, that’s fine; if he died that very night, that’s fine too.** Every state is a manifestation of Buddha. This koan (Book of Equanimity Case 36, Blue Cliff Record Case 3) encapsulates the **Zen view of life and death** . Master Ma is essentially saying: *Ill or well, living or dying – in each state I am Buddha*. His reply is also a teaching to the monks: *Do not see sickness as something other than Buddha*. Often we think enlightenment means we won’t suffer or become ill, but here the great master is sick and fully embracing it. His **equanimity** in the face of mortality is the real lesson. In Zen literature, this phrase “Sun-Faced Buddha, Moon-Faced Buddha” has come to symbolize the **transience of life** and the thusness of each moment. One commentary says: *“If you live 1800 years, that’s a long life; if you live one day, that’s a long life too – both are thus.”* Mazu’s teaching goes beyond mere acceptance; it is an affirmation: whether one’s **“face”** is bright and healthy or pallid and sick, one is Buddha. The invitation to us is to meet our own changing conditions with that same **fearlessness and clarity** . Do not attach to the “Sun-Faced” times of vigor, and do not dread the “Moon-Faced” times of decline. Each has its **place in the great Wholeness** . When one realizes this, one’s very body – however ailing – is seen as the body of Buddha. Mazu’s simple phrase thus shines as a Zen beacon of hope and non fear. Contemporary Zen teachers often invoke it to remind students to **use each day well** , since

matter how long we live it is “*like a single day*” on the cosmic scale . And if today happens to be one’s last, a Zen practitioner aims to face it with the same gentle smile Master Ma had when he uttered “*Sun-Faced Buddha, Moon-Faced Buddha.*”

8.

Hakuin’s “What Is the Sound of One Hand?” – *Context:* **Hakuin Ekaku** (1686–1769) was a Japanese

Zen master who revitalized Rinzai Zen. He created many koans. His

most famous: “**Two hands clap**”¹⁹

and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?” . This koan, often shortened to “*What is the sound of one hand clapping?*” , is usually the first koan assigned to novice monks in Rinzai Zen. *Commentary:* Hakuin intended this koan to arouse **great doubt and concentration** . At first glance, it sounds like a riddle or nonsense: one hand alone makes no sound – or does it? The student might be tempted to answer with a joke (“silence!” or by clapping one hand on their body or a table). But any quick answer misses the point. The “*sound of one hand*” is not a literal noise; it is sometimes called the “**sound of one hand washing**” , meaning it washes away delusion. In some accounts, Hakuin came up with this koan after a neighbor asked him why he meditated – he answered it was so he could hear the sound of one hand. The neighbor was mystified, but Hakuin promised him that if he died without hearing it, Hakuin would listen at his grave and tell him. This dramatic tale underscores Hakuin’s flair – he wanted to plant a question that would **consume the student’s whole mind** . In koan training, “*one-hand sound*” can’t be solved by reasoning. The student must **turn hearing back on itself** – what is the “sound” of the mind when all duality (two hands) is collapsed into unity (one hand)? The

“one hand” can symbolize the **One Mind** . Hakuin’s koan drives the student to a precipice: trying to “hear” the unhearable eventually forces a leap to a new mode of perception. Zen lore is full 6 of stories of monks struggling with this koan for days, weeks, months – until in deep fatigue or despair they suddenly catch an **inner sound** (or insight) and experience kenshō (an initial awakening). Hakuin himself stressed that one must “become one with the sound.” Some say when you truly hear the one-hand sound, **the whole universe is ringing** . Interestingly, Hakuin gave this koan to laypeople as well – it appears in his writings that even village women practiced it and gained clarity. Its wording has entered pop culture and everyday idioms. Yet its true purpose remains what Hakuin intended: to baffle the ordinary mind. The koan is not asking for an answer like “*It is the sound of silence*” – it is inviting you to **experience the soundless sound** . One Zen verse about it says: “*If you hear it, all affairs are settled.*” Perhaps it is the same sound poet Basho heard as a “**old pond / a frog jumps in – / plop.**” Perhaps it is what you hear right now, if you really listen. What is the sound of one hand? Listen...

“Not the Wind, Not the Flag” (Huineng’s Instantaneous Insight) –

Context: Two monks were

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watching a flag fluttering in the breeze at **Tang-era Shaolin Monastery** . One said, “The flag is moving.” The other argued, “No, it’s the wind that is moving.” They debated back and forth. Master **Huineng** (the 6th Patriarch, 638–713) happened to be passing by. He interjected: “**It is neither the wind nor the flag that moves. It is your mind that moves.**” Hearing this, the two monks were struck with

realization . *Commentary:* This well-known anecdote (Gateless Gate #29) illustrates

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Zen's focus on mind as primary. The monks were caught in **relative truth** – flag vs. wind, a distinction of phenomena. Huineng redirected them to the **absolute perspective** : all perception ultimately happens in the mind. The flag isn't "moving" of itself; movement is a concept arising from our sensory experience. If the mind did not register change, we wouldn't say wind or flag move at all. Huineng's statement creates a **sudden shift in viewpoint** – from external to internal. Essentially, he is saying: *Look at what's moving within you.* The moment the monks did so, their argument dissolved and they tasted an aspect of enlightenment: the insight that **"all things are in the mind."** In some versions, Huineng adds, *"If your mind is still, the whole world is still."* This does not mean that wind and flag are illusions or that nothing physical is happening, but it points to the **mind dependent nature of reality** as experienced. The koan is sometimes retold as: *Two monks argue about a waving banner. Huineng says, 'Mind is moving.'* It has a direct parallel in modern Zen teachings – for example, a teacher might ask a student who is reacting to something, *"What is moving now ?"* It is a prompt to turn inward. The monks in the story might have thought Huineng was siding with neither of them, yet in transcending their dualism he delivered the higher truth that **subject and object are not two** . The flag's movement isn't separate from the mind perceiving it. This flash of **non-duality** was enough for the monks to awaken (or at least to be momentarily stunned out of their small perspective). Interestingly, the flag and wind scenario is a classical Chan story even predating Huineng – some attribute it to 5th Patriarch Daman Hongren. But associating it with Huineng underscores his reputation for **"sudden enlightenment."** Indeed, Huineng himself attained enlightenment upon hearing a single line of

the Diamond Sutra about the mind – here he passes on that style of instant insight. The next time you see something moving and label it, try to catch your mind in the act – *that* mind-movement is, as Huineng would say, the true source of the phenomenon. When mind becomes **still and clear** , the distinctions of wind and flag (and all opposites) subside into a unified reality. In that reality, even movement and stillness are not two separate things.

The Sixth Patriarch’s “Think Neither Good nor Evil” (Original Face) –

Context: This koan comes

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from the life of **Huineng** , the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Zen.

According to the *Platform Sūtra* , after Huineng received the robe and bowl of succession from the Fifth Patriarch Hongren, he had to flee ⁷ due to envy from other monks. A monk named **Ming** (Huiming) pursued him, driven by regret for missing the transmission. Huineng, seeing Ming coming, placed the robe and bowl on a rock and hid. When Ming arrived, he tried to pick up the robe and bowl but could not – they were too heavy, pinned by spiritual force. Ming called out: “I came for the Dharma, not the robe. Please teach me!” Huineng then came out and said, “**Without thinking of good or evil, what is your original face before your parents were born?**” . Upon hearing this, Ming was instantly enlightened.

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Commentary: “**What is your original face (original nature) before you were born?**” has become a classic koan prompt (it appears as Case 23 in the Gateless Gate). Huineng’s instruction “think neither good nor evil” first put Ming’s mind in a state of **absolute neutrality** ,

free of judgment or concept of opposite values. In that **open presence** , Huineng then poses the unanswerable question of **ultimate identity** – not the face in the mirror, not the personality with likes and dislikes, but the “*you*” before any conditioning, before even physical existence. This was like a **lightning bolt** in Ming’s mind, cutting through to the **true self** (which is no-self). Ming experienced an awakening – he exclaimed, “*How extraordinary! All is just as it is! I now see that Huineng’s mind and my mind are not different.*” Ming bowed deeply and asked to become Huineng’s disciple. In Zen, “*original face*” (Chinese *běn lái miàn mù*) refers to one’s **fundamental nature** , the **Buddha-nature** that is unborn and deathless. By asking Ming to directly *perceive* that, Huineng gave the **direct pointing** that Zen is famous for. This koan is used to this day: “*Show me your original face before your parents’ birth*” – a teacher might demand this of a student who is stuck in self-concepts. It pushes one beyond the limits of the personal narrative into the **timeless present** . Huineng’s instruction to drop thoughts of good or evil is also key. **Non-discrimination** is a prerequisite to seeing the original face. As long as we are mired in judging, naming, categorizing (this is good, that is bad), we remain at the level of duality. By letting go of “good” and “bad,” Ming’s mind became like a clear sky. In that clear sky, Huineng’s riddle awakened the **Great Doubt** – who am I, really, without any reference point? – which in Zen is resolved only by a leap into **non-dual awareness** . Ming’s enlightenment demonstrates the Zen belief that realization can happen **in an instant** , given the right conditions. One could say Huineng transmitted the true Dharma to Ming right there – not through a robe or lengthy sermon, but through a **challenging question that pointed Ming’s mind back to its source** . This koan invites us to do the same: in a quiet moment, drop all thought of past and future, right and wrong, *you* and *me* . What remains? What is that “*face*” that is looking through your eyes right now? Keep looking for it – don’t seek an intellectual answer – and perhaps, like Ming, you will suddenly

perceive something wondrous: your **original nature** , bright and unobstructed.

11.

Goso's Buffalo (The Whole Buffalo Passes Through) – *Context:* Zen master **Wu-tsu Fa-yen** (known as Goso, 11th century) posed a riddle: *“It is like a buffalo that passes through a lattice window. His head, horns, and all four legs pass through. Why can't his tail pass through as well?”* (Gateless Gate Case 38)

22

. *Commentary:* The image is cartoonish – an entire water buffalo has squeezed through a small window, only its tail is stuck. What does this represent? The buffalo symbolizes the practitioner's **true nature** or perhaps the **self** making its way into enlightenment. The **tail** , seemingly trivial, is the last attachment or concept that remains. The koan is asking: if the buffalo (one's **Buddha-nature**) is free, why should the tail (the tiniest bit of ego or illusion) hold one back? Wumen's commentary suggests that **“passing through”** means entering the realm of the absolute, where nothing should remain outside. *“If you can open your mouth on this matter,”* he says, *“you will see that every day a new buffalo is sticking out from the lattice.”* In other words, this is an **everyday predicament** – we might have profound insights (the big buffalo gets through), but then a **subtle identification** or attachment (the tail) prevents full liberation. Perhaps it is a lingering **sense of “I”** – the most stubborn bit to let go. The koan challenges us: what is that tail? If everything passes, why not that?

Some interpret the tail 8 as representing the **discriminating mind** that we find hardest to let drop. Others say it points to **fundamentally ungraspable reality** – an echo of the paradox “not one, not two.” The tail stuck outside is like a

thread of duality left hanging. How to free it? The koan can also be seen as a **warning against partial realization** : you may get your head and body through (glimpse emptiness), but if you leave even a hair of self clinging, you're still not fully through. The solution isn't given in words – it might require a student to demonstrate an understanding beyond logic. One could say, “*Buffalo, tail, window – all are empty!*” but that's conceptual. The real resolution might be a **wordless action or a roar** that shows no tail is left. Women's verse says: “*If the tail passes through, the entire buffalo will be lost.*” This hints at another layer: perhaps **oneness** includes a little twoness – if absolutely everything is gone, who realizes what? So the buffalo's tail might be a metaphor for the **relative world that is still part of the absolute** . A Zen adept freely moves in both: sometimes he's a buffalo in the open field of Suchness, sometimes a tail caught in the net of particulars – but he is not troubled by either. Still, Goso's buffalo makes us laugh and also scratch our heads. The next time you feel *almost* enlightened except for that pesky tail, remember the poor buffalo – and perhaps **stop at nothing until even the tail is through** .

12.

Joshu's Oak Tree in the Garden – *Context*: A monk asked **Zhaozhou (Joshu)** , “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?” (In Zen lore this basically means: what is the ultimate

truth of Zen?). Joshu replied, “**The oak tree in the garden.**” . In some translations, it's a cypress tree or cedar – the type of tree is not the point. *Commentary*: Joshu's famous response has perplexed people for centuries. Bodhidharma was the first patriarch who came from India to China – asking why he came is asking, “*Why Zen? What is the*

fundamental teaching?” Joshu did not launch into philosophy about emptiness or Buddha-nature. He simply pointed to **immediate reality** – the monk’s everyday surroundings – by saying “*the oak tree in the garden.*” This is a **shattering answer** because it is completely straightforward and yet seems irrelevant. But it forces the monk’s mind out of seeking some abstract meaning and grounds it in **concrete presence** . The *true meaning* of Zen, Joshu implies, is nothing other than **the suchness of this very moment** – in this case, a tree. As soon as the monk’s mind pivots to look at the tree (or at least imagine it), he might catch a glimpse of *thusness*. It’s said that another time a different monk asked Joshu the same question and Joshu answered, “*The garden gate.*” He would give different “ordinary” answers to the same question, to avoid students clinging to any one object as special. The point was to **deflect the inquiry back to the present**. The koan asks us: can you see that “*the way things are*” is the ultimate truth? If you expected profundity and got a mundane tree, does it disappoint, or does it enlighten? Many commentaries say Joshu was demonstrating “**identity action**” – his mind was completely one with the time, place, and question, so his answer sprang from *exactly where he stood*. In winter he might have said “a snowdrift,” in summer “the peonies blossoming.” The *meaning* of Zen is *whatever is in front of you*. Of course, a student could not just parrot Joshu. If asked the same question, and one answered “the oak tree in the garden” without genuine insight, Joshu would likely retort, “*Dead stump! You only understand the shell.*” We must make **Joshu’s realization our own** . What is Bodhidharma’s true intention? It’s *right here* . One Zen verse reads: “*Hundreds of flowers in spring, the moon in autumn... When mind is free of idle concerns, every season is the best season.*” Joshu’s “oak tree” is like that – a direct pointing to **tathatā** , the **thusness** of everything. If one really sees it, the question of “why Bodhidharma came” is already answered. This koan encourages us not to overlook the **miracle in the ordinary** . As one Zen master later quipped:

“Joshu did not hide the truth – the monk simply missed it.” May we not miss it when an oak tree (or any everyday thing) manifests the Dharma before our eyes.

13.

Tozan’s “Three Pounds of Flax” – *Context:* A monk asked **Dongshan Shouchu** (Tozan, 洞山首楚, 9th century, not to be confused with the famous Dongshan Liangjie) “*What is Buddha?*” At that moment, Dongshan was weighing some flax (or hemp) on a scale. He answered, **“Three pounds of flax.”** . *Commentary:* This is another classic example of a **concrete answer to a metaphysical question** (Gateless Gate Case 18, Blue Cliff Record Case 12). The monk expected some lofty description of Buddha, but Tozan simply responded with the **weight of the flax he was handling** . Like Joshu’s oak tree, this reply yanks the monk out of his head and into the reality right in front of him. *This* – three pounds of flax – is Buddha. Why? Because in Zen, **Buddha is not a god or a person, but the true nature of all things** . At that moment, Buddha was manifest as flax weighed on a scale. Tozan recognized it. His answer is not a teaching about flax; it is a demonstration of **complete presence** and non-separation. He essentially says: *Buddha is exactly what is happening here and now*. Wumen comments, “*Old Tozan attained the “isness” (thusness) of things and used it freely. But tell me, at that moment, did Tozan actually answer the monk’s question or not?*”* If you say he did, you fall into one side; if you say he didn’t, you fall into

another. The only way to understand Tozan's response is to experience the state of mind from which it arose. Imagine being so totally absorbed in your task that if someone asks you "What is Buddha?" you respond without a second thought: "*This thing right here!*" – not as a clever device but as genuine truth. That was Tozan's state. This koan, like many others, warns us not to stray after abstract Buddhas while ignoring the living reality around us. Another angle: When asked about Buddha (which implies something immeasurable), Tozan gives a measured figure . It might seem like a non-sequitur, but in Zen those boundaries of big/small, sacred/mundane are dissolved. In the *absolute* , Buddha is infinite; but in the *relative* , Buddha is exactly "three pounds of flax" – no more, no less. When one realizes the absolute in the relative, *three pounds of flax is infinity, and infinity is three pounds of flax* . Countless Zen monks have grappled with this koan trying to see what Tozan saw. It is said one monk pondered "three pounds of flax" day and night until he felt every ordinary object *glow* with significance. Then he attained enlightenment. This is how koans work on the mind: an arbitrary phrase like "three pounds of flax" becomes a mantra that eventually reveals "Buddha" in everything. When there is no separation between the sacred and the profane , one might finally exclaim in realization, just as Tozan did while weighing hemp, "Ah, three pounds of flax!"

Yunmen's "A Dried Shit-Stick" – Context: A monk earnestly asked the master **Yunmen Wenyan**

14.

(Unmon, 864–949), “What is Buddha?” Yunmen replied, “**A dried shit-stick.**” . (In those days,

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wooden sticks were used as toilet wipes – so basically, he said “a dried feces cleaning stick.”) *Commentary*: This outrageous answer is one of the most famous in Zen (Gateless Gate Case 21). It perfectly illustrates **Zen’s iconoclasm** – Yunmen took the highest concept (Buddha) and equated it with the lowliest object (a poop stick). Why? To **shake the monk loose from dualistic piety** and any idea of Buddha as something pure, distant, and exalted. Yunmen’s “dried shit-stick” drags Buddha off the altar and slams him into the monk’s face. As vulgar as it sounds, it is profoundly compassionate – it spares the monk from clinging to a false Buddha. Zen records are full of dramatic responses to “What is Buddha?": “*Three pounds of flax,*” “*the oak tree,*” “*this very mind,*” “*no mind, no Buddha,*” etc. Yunmen’s stands out for its shock value. Imagine the monk’s reaction – likely stunned silence or maybe a burst of laughter or anger. **Either way, the concept of “Buddha” in his mind was annihilated.** If he had a sense of humor and insight, he might have caught Yunmen’s meaning: *Buddha is found even in filth; Buddha is so far beyond form that it can take the form of a excrement stick; or perhaps Buddha is exactly the ordinary object you least esteem.* Some commentators say Yunmen was in a state of “no-mind” and just blurted out the first thing at hand (perhaps he was in the

outhouse). But that underestimates Yunmen – he was known for sharp, tailored answers. Calling Buddha a shit-stick is a deliberate **Dharma combat move** . It echoes the Zen teaching “*If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.*” Yunmen killed the monk’s idol-Buddha with words. The crudeness also ensures the encounter sticks in memory (pun intended) – countless practitioners have meditated on this koan and realized they too have mental “shit-sticks” they cling to. **Wumen’s verse** about this koan says: “*He’s so poor, all he can do is mimic the Buddha to try to support his school! Fortunately, no one was there to see his shame.*” This humorous take suggests Yunmen so wholeheartedly manifested the “*Buddha in base form*” that he looked a bit foolish – but that itself was the teaching: **true Buddha includes foolishness and shame; nothing is outside the One Mind**. Another angle: After the monk’s question, Yunmen might have felt that **any answer at all would become an object of attachment** , so he offered something the monk *couldn’t* latch onto reverently. The only thing the student can do with “dried shit-stick” is to drop conceptual thinking and perhaps feel a gut punch of truth. In Zen training, when one has a deep glimpse of reality, *even a toilet stick radiates the Dharma* . Yunmen’s response invites us to find the **sacred in the profane** and to not separate our spiritual ideal from the mucky reality. Ultimately, **Buddha is everywhere** – or as one Zen master responded when asked “What is Buddha?”: “*Whatever – even a fart.*” That is not disrespect; it is pointing out the **non-duality of samsara and nirvana** . Of course, Yunmen wasn’t literally saying the Buddha of history is a dung-stick – he was saying **Buddha-nature** is present even in what we reject. If you truly realize that, you might laugh out loud and feel a great relief – nothing is unsacred anymore.

Zen Master Nansen Cuts a Cat – Context: Zen master **Nansen** (Nanquan Puyuan, 748–835)

15.

encountered monks from the Eastern and Western halls quarreling over a cat. Nansen seized the cat and held up a knife, saying, *“If you can say a true word, you will save the cat. If not, I will cut it in two.”* None of the monks could speak, so Nansen **cut the cat in two** . That evening, Nansen told the story to Master Joshu and asked for his reaction. Joshu thereupon **took off his sandals, placed them on his head, and walked out silently** . Nansen said, *“If you had been there, you would have saved the cat.”* . *Commentary:* This dramatic koan (Gateless Gate #14) is one of the most puzzling and,

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frankly, disturbing in Zen literature. Did Nansen really kill a cat to make a Zen point? It’s symbolic (one hopes) – the cat represents the monks’ **attachments** (maybe attachments to opinions or to “ownership” of the cat). The East/West hall monks couldn’t agree – a metaphor for **dualistic conflict** . Nansen’s demand for a *“true word”* was a challenge for someone to rise above duality and **resolve the situation with Zen insight** . When nobody responded, Nansen **“cut through”** the tangled debate by (allegorically) cutting the cat – ending the argument and shocking the monks. In essence, he demonstrated that **without awakened mind, living beings (the cat, and by extension the monks themselves) are “spiritually dead.”** Later, Joshu’s response is what saves the cat retroactively. Joshu’s bizarre action – putting his sandals on his head – was an example of a **“true word” beyond words** . Sandals on the head is utterly illogical (like a mourner’s gesture or a child’s play). It broke all reasoning. Yet it perfectly expressed Joshu’s state of mind: one could interpret it as **mourning the cat** (wearing dirt on the head in grief) or as **making a statement that in Zen, low is high** (sandals = lowly, on head =

exalted). Or maybe it was simply a spontaneous act with no conceptual meaning – which itself is a “*true word*.” Nansen recognized Joshu’s embodiment of Zen freedom in that moment – hence saying if Joshu had been present earlier, his single act would have sufficed to prevent the tragedy. This koan highlights Zen’s emphasis that **awakening must be demonstrated in action, not talk** . The monks could not save the cat because they were stuck in **conceptual or emotional paralysis** . Joshu could respond freely (even absurdly) because he was **free of attachment** . Some Zen commentaries say “Nansen cuts the cat” and “Joshu saves the cat” together illustrate *Great Compassion and Great Wisdom* . Nansen’s drastic compassion halted the

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monks’ fighting (at great cost), while Joshu’s wise non-verbal response revealed the way out of conflict and duality. Wumen’s verse on this koan says: “*Had Joshu been there, he’d have snatched the knife, and in Nanquan’s hand saved all beings.*” In other words, Joshu might have stopped the violence altogether – perhaps by **acting sooner and more boldly** . What does putting sandals on one’s head mean to you? Koans often leave us in that space of **not-knowing** , which is precisely where insight arises. Perhaps it instructs us that when confronted with divisive situations (“monks fighting over a cat”), a true Zen mind might do something **unexpected and unorthodox** to cut through – ideally, without anyone (human or cat) getting hurt. The “cat” can also symbolize the **present moment** – if we fail to respond with authenticity, the moment is “dead”; if we respond with our whole being (sandals on head, or whatever the moment calls for), the moment is *alive* . Ultimately, this koan pushes the student to ask: *What would I have done? What is a ‘true word’ in*

this very moment of my life? Answer that, and you have saved not just one cat, but countless sentient beings.

Joshu's "Wash Your Bowl" – *Context:* A newcomer monk named **Zhu-yan** came to Master Joshu

16.

(Zhaozhou). Joshu asked, "Have you eaten your rice porridge?" The monk said,
"Yes, I have."
Joshu ²⁶

said, "**Then go wash your bowl.**" Upon hearing this, the monk was enlightened . *Commentary:* This delightful koan (Gateless Gate #7) shows Joshu's genius for **pointing to the very ordinary as the site of awakening** . The dialogue seems trivial: Joshu is essentially saying, "*If you're done eating, clean up.*" But that is exactly why it jolted the monk into realization. After consuming teachings (rice porridge), one must **digest and then cleanse** – letting go of even the teaching. "Wash your bowl" is **pure activity** – straightforward, no-mind engagement in the present task. In that moment, the monk suddenly "*got it*" : Zen is nothing other than *this*. He had likely expected Joshu to give some high instruction, but Joshu just gave him a chore. The young monk's mind, having eaten up the Dharma, was still "dirty" with subtle conceptual remnants of seeking. Joshu, by saying "*Wash your bowl,*" effectively told him to **empty himself** – to start fresh, without clinging to the past meal (past knowledge). There is also deep symbolism: an **empty bowl** is a classic image for an open mind. By washing his bowl, the monk emptied and purified his mind-bowl, instantly experiencing

enlightenment as the **ordinary mind of cleaning up** . Case records say from then on the monk understood the meaning of “**everyday life is the Way.**” This koan emphasizes **simple mindfulness** . After enlightenment, there is no fanfare – you still must do the dishes. But the difference is, after Zen insight, *washing the bowl is recognized as the miraculous activity of Buddha*. Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water (or wash bowls). After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water – and *wash bowls*. Nothing changes, yet everything is different. The monk’s sudden satori shows that when the **time is ripe** , the smallest trigger can spark awakening. He had likely been straining to “get” Zen – Joshu’s casual instruction allowed his mind to relax and let the truth sink in. Wumen’s commentary on this koan playfully admonishes students: “*Joshu’s eyes see the distressed monk; easily he strips off the monk’s blinders. If you can’t grasp the plain truth here, you’ll wear your bowl on your head for ten thousand years like a ghost.*” In other words, **don’t overcomplicate Zen** – see the direct teaching in Joshu’s words. Have you eaten? If so, did you truly taste that meal? If yes, then proceed to the next task. **Nothing is lacking; nothing is leftover.** Now , wash the bowl – which is to say, attend to what’s needed in this moment with full presence. That is **Zen in action** . Even today, Zen teachers might simply say “*Wash your bowl*” to a student who is overthinking or lingering on a past realization. It means: “*Finish and let go; move on.*” Ironically, “Wash your bowl” became itself a famous saying (thus, an object of thought for many). But the point is to **feel the water, feel the bowl, just wash** . The monk did just that, and he awakened to the **choreless chore** – where self and bowl and water and washing all merge in thusness. His bowl was clean; his mind was clear. May we all realize such clarity in our daily cleanup.

17.

Kyogen's "Man up in a Tree" – Context: Master **Xiangyan Zhixian** (Kyōgen, 9th century) presented

this scenario: *"It's like a man who is hanging by his teeth from a branch high up in a tree. His hands grasp no bough, his feet rest on no limb. Another person beneath the tree asks him, 'What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?' If the man up the tree does*

not answer, he fails the questioner. If ²⁷ ²⁸ he does answer, he will lose his life (fall and die). What should he do?" (Gateless Gate Case 5) . Commentary: This koan is a vivid **no-win** riddle intended to break one's reliance on ordinary logic. The *"man in the tree"* represents a Zen adept who has reached a point of **complete precariousness** – he's in a state of emptiness (holding on by teeth only), where any use of the tongue (speaking) will plunge him out of that state. Yet someone asks for the truth. It's a **dilemma of compassion vs. personal attainment** : do you hold silence to preserve your enlightenment (life) or do you speak to benefit another and thus *"die"* (lose your non-dual state)? It's essentially the problem of **teaching enlightenment without leaving enlightenment** . Kyogen's koan suggests the only way to resolve it is a **response beyond conventional responses** . When he posed this to his monks, none could answer. Wumen comments, *"Even if you have something to say, you dare not express it. Ultimately, how to proceed?"* The "answer" is not given in words; it might be an *"alive"* demonstration (perhaps similar to Joshu's sandals-on-head or any *wordless expression of Zen*).

In practice, some say the man in the tree should **quote something** (speaking without it being “his own” answer), thereby saving himself – but that wouldn’t be a true “Zen” answer, it’d be second-hand. The crux is to **respond without the dualism of life vs. death**. One interpretation is that the teacher (man in tree) should “*cut the root*” – i.e. let go completely (fall willingly) and thus embody the answer through his death. That sounds dramatic, but metaphorically it means **sacrifice the self** for the Dharma. Many commentators point out this is asking about **Bodhidharma’s intent** (i.e., ultimate truth) and the only real answer is to **let go of one’s life (ego)** – *that* is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming (to transmit the letting go of self). So perhaps the man in the tree can only *answer* by dropping – which might kill the small self but reveal the great Self. Indeed, Xiangyan (Kyogen) himself struggled with koan study until, in despair, he burned his notes and gave up – shortly after, he heard a pebble strike bamboo and attained enlightenment. His great realization came when he **let himself fall** from the tree of

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striving. Thus, this koan can be seen as autobiographical – he’s urging us to “drop the body-mind.” Another approach: The man could **answer with silence**, which might be a “true answer” if conveyed correctly (not simply refusing to speak, but communicating wordlessly). However, the scenario says not answering fails the questioner – so presumably the questioner won’t understand silence. This reinforces that **ordinary silence or speaking both fall short** – something extraordinary is needed. Wumen’s verse says: “*Kyogen is truly ambitious, / Catching tigers and seizing serpents. / Ambition fulfilled, / He still remains in the tree.*” This suggests even solving this koan (catching the tiger) leaves one hanging – because enlightenment is not an endpoint. There is always deeper embodiment; one is forever balancing on the edge of the absolute and relative. The koan

challenges practitioners: **What is your “true word” when you have nothing to stand on?** It’s a test of **original creativity** under extreme pressure. In daily life terms, we sometimes find ourselves “between a rock and a hard place” – any move seems wrong. Zen would say: find a **response from emptiness** , not driven by personal gain or fear. Sometimes that means a leap of faith (falling), sometimes a startling action (like a belly laugh, or a sudden clap). The koan doesn’t prescribe an answer – it provokes a *mind break*. Only you can discover what “Buddha’s meaning” you express when all usual means are cut off. And if you manage that, you will have, in a sense, **died and been reborn** in wisdom.

18.

Shuzan’s Staff – *Context:* Master **Shuzan (Shoushan)** held out his short staff and told his monks, *“If you call this a staff, you are attached to name. If you call it not a staff, you deny reality. Now what do you call it?”* (This is Case 43 of the Gateless Gate) . *Commentary:* Here we have a classic **Zen object**

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lesson . The stick (staff) is plainly there, yet any label falls into error: saying “staff” is a convention that might blind one to the *essence* beyond the label; saying “not a staff” is contrarian and ignores its functional reality. It’s a **double bind** similar to “the sound of one hand” or “man in tree” – one cannot answer yes or no, staff or not-staff. The only way out is a **response from beyond duality** . When Shuzan demanded an answer, one could imagine a monk coming up,

snatching the staff and breaking it, or tossing it aside, or even hitting Shuzan with it (if daring!). Perhaps another might simply bow or make a metaphor. The recorded “answer” in one version is that a monk stepped forward, **took the stick and pulled off a great dramatic pose** as if to take it, but then – unclear what happened next, possibly enlightenment for someone. The koan forces examination of how **mind uses names** . A Zen anecdote: Once a monk said, “*It’s not that it cannot be named, but that the name fails.*” He means the word “staff” is not the actual staff – the *thing-in-itself* is beyond the name. But that’s still an intellectual answer. Shuzan wanted a demonstration that the student **sees the staff’s true nature directly** . The staff is often a symbol of the teacher’s authority, too. So Shuzan might also be testing if someone can take up **true Zen authority** by meeting this challenge without fumbling. Women’s commentary on this koan says, “*If you can call it or not call it, either way you are using the stick. Rather than be stuck, try opening your mouth to speak truth directly – you can’t, eh?*” Essentially, the student must somehow **use the staff (reality) to express truth, rather than be used by concepts** . Women’s verse goes: “*Holding out the staff, he gave an imperative; / He’s either smashed or accepted. / At the crossroads of yes and no – / The staff snatched away, the true teaching revealed.*” It implies that the winner in this exchange will *snatch* the staff and transcend the dilemma. This koan teaches us about **non-dual perception** . In everyday terms: many situations have apparent dualistic choices that both feel wrong. Zen encourages finding the “**third way**” – an answer from presence or intuition that resolves the dichotomy. For example, if asked, “Is this object sacred or mundane?” perhaps the Zen answer is to *drink tea with it* – neither calling it sacred nor denying it, but *using* it naturally. Shuzan’s staff is like a **pointer** – pointing beyond “this” or “not-this.” The student’s task is to **see what it’s pointing to** . Some interpreters say the answer is “*Your Mind*” – the staff is a staff *in your mind* , and not a staff *in your mind* , so what is it? Only mind. But caution: an

answer like “mind” is conceptual. The real solution might be to break the separation between self and staff entirely – to *become* the staff. Perhaps the enlightened student would pick it up and do a **little dance** – the staff dancing itself. In life, whenever we name something, we should remember the “**stick koan**” – don’t get too attached to the names, but also acknowledge things as they are. In Zen we strive to experience “*staffness*” without clinging to “*staff*.” Then we can respond to the world freely. When needed, call a stick a stick; when needed, don’t call it anything – just use it or appreciate it. The koan invites you into that **flexible, awakened relationship with reality** .

19.

“**Everyday Life Is the Path**” – *Context*: This is the famous statement of **Dongshan (Tozan) Liangjie** (807–869, co-founder of the Caodong/Sōtō school). A monk asked, “*What is the Way?*” Dongshan replied, “**Everyday life is the Way.**” The monk asked, “*How do I live it?*” Dongshan said, “**If you try to direct yourself toward it, you will go away from it.**” The monk pressed, “*But if I don’t try, how can I know it’s the Way?*” Dongshan answered, “**The Way does not belong to knowing or not-knowing. Knowing is delusion; not-knowing is blankness. If you truly realize the Way of no doubt, it is like the great void , so vast and boundless. How can it be discussed at the level of affirmation and negation?**” Upon hearing this, the monk awakened . *Commentary*: This exchange mirrors

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Nansen’s “ordinary mind is Tao” (#7 above) – in fact, Dongshan’s teacher was Nanquan (Nansen). It emphasizes the **immanence of the Path** : one need not retreat or attain some special state; the enlightened Way is right in **daily activities** . The monk’s questions show our

common confusion: *How do I practice this ordinary mind?* If you *effortfully strive* (“try to direct yourself”), you create a separation

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– a “you” trying to reach a “Way.” But the Way is not separate – it’s like telling water to go to water. Conversely, if you lazily do nothing, you won’t see it either. Master Dongshan describes the Way as **beyond intellection** (knowing) and **beyond ignorance** (not-knowing) – it’s a living reality, not a concept. When you **really realize it**, it’s just “**no-doubt,**” a certainty as natural as open space. It cannot be grasped or described in dualistic terms like right/wrong (affirmation/negation). These words triggered the monk’s enlightenment much like Nansen’s did for Joshu. This koan encourages us to stop searching “*out there*” and instead to **trust and live in the present fully**. The monk’s mistake was thinking the Path is something other than living his ordinary life – hence he wanted to “*know*” it as an object or to practice it specially. Dongshan dissolves that by saying any attempt to *control* the experience misses it, and any complete passivity also misses it. One must **live spontaneously**. In Zen, this is often phrased as “*not too tight, not too loose.*” You engage wholeheartedly in daily life (chop wood, carry water, work, eat, talk) but without *graspy intention* to become enlightened, and without apathetic drift either. That balanced, natural **attunement** is the Way. In practice, how do we cultivate that? Through meditation and mindful presence, we train to neither chase nor run away from phenomena. Over time, **every moment becomes practice** – whether washing dishes or driving or emailing, one is on the Path. Even confusion or mistakes are part of it – one learns from them without self-judgment. The koan also foreshadows Zen’s teaching of **Great Doubt**: “*not-knowing*” in Zen is praised as an attitude (beginner’s mind), but here Dongshan clarifies

that clinging to ignorance is as bad as clinging to knowledge. One must **transcend both** – which the monk did, reaching “*no doubt.*” The “*great void*” (empty, boundless awareness) opened for him. Then daily life truly is the Buddha’s life. This koan has been a guiding star especially in the **Sōtō Zen** tradition, where just sitting (shikantaza) and just living is enlightenment in action. It cuts off the erroneous view of a *special holy state* separate from mundane chores. As layman Pang (Case 42) celebrated, “*My miraculous power is carrying water and chopping wood.*” The *Platform Sutra* similarly says, “*No-mind is the Way; straightforward mind is the place of practice.*” In summary, **stop looking elsewhere – whatever you are doing, that very doing completely is the Zen path.** When you fully realize this, every step, every breath, every bowl you wash is the **Way at play** .

20.

“No Mind, No Buddha” – *Context:* A monk asked Master **Mazu (Ma-tsu)** , “Why do you teach ‘*Mind is Buddha*’ ?” Mazu said, “*To stop a baby from crying.*” The monk then asked, “And once the baby stops crying?” Mazu replied, “**No mind, no Buddha.**” (From *Chronicles of Mazu* – this dialogue illustrates how he gave different teachings depending on students’ needs.) *Commentary:* This koan shows Zen’s flexibility with **upāya (skillful means)** . At one stage, Mazu taught “*This mind is Buddha*” (as we saw in Case 13 with Tozan’s three pounds of flax – that was one of Mazu’s disciples). He gave that positive teaching to inspire those who were dispirited or too intellectual – it “*stopped the baby’s cry*” by affirming inherent Buddha-nature: *Just this mind, however restless, is Buddha.* But once a student relies on that concept or becomes complacent, Mazu flips the teaching to “*No mind, no Buddha.*” This is a negation of all concepts

– pushing the student into **groundlessness** . *No mind* means there is **no independent mind-entity to call Buddha** ; *no Buddha* means the **idea of Buddha** must be dropped too. It is Zen’s version of **emptiness** after form. Once the baby is quiet, there’s no need for the lullaby. Thus, advanced students get the **“no-Buddha” medicine** to remove any subtle attachment to enlightenment. One can imagine the whiplash a monk might feel: first told his mind is Buddha (so he gains confidence), later told “no mind, no Buddha” (so he loses arrogance). The interplay of these teachings leads to the **Middle Way beyond either extreme** . If one clings to “*no mind, no Buddha*” as an ultimate doctrine, that’s also a trap – one would cry again (fall into nihilism). Then perhaps Mazu would circle back and say “*The one who understands ‘no mind, no Buddha’ – that is Buddha!*” Zen masters would indeed tailor their words like this. The monk’s question here highlights Zen’s dynamic 15

approach: *Why do you say X? – To meet you where you are. – And once that’s done? – Then I say ~X.* It’s profound pedagogical honesty. Not many religious teachers openly admit they gave a provisional teaching – but Zen is refreshingly transparent here. The aim is always the student’s liberation, not consistency. What does this mean for us? Simply that at times we may need to remind ourselves: **This mind (with all its thoughts) is Buddha** – to cultivate self-trust and see the sacred in our very consciousness. Other times, especially if we get conceited or think we’ve figured it out, we might need to remember: **No mind (nothing graspable), no Buddha (nothing to attain)** . That shocks us into dropping conceptual arrogance. Ultimately, one must integrate both: *Mind is Buddha* (the positive expression of unity) and *No mind, no Buddha* (the negative expression of unity). The full enlightenment is **not one, not two** – not just mind, not separate from mind. This interplay is seen in other Zen dialogues too. In fact, these phrases became classic koans: “This mind is Buddha” is Case 30 of Gateless Gate; “No mind, no Buddha” is Case 33. Students had to

resolve each, then reconcile them. Zhaozhou himself asked Mazu's successor about these two and got different answers (one said "mind is Buddha," another "no mind, no Buddha"). Zhaozhou's enlightenment is sometimes attributed to **holding these contradictory koans** until he saw through to the source beyond both. Thus, this story encourages us to be flexible and not cling to *any* formula. Are you crying out in need of comfort? Perhaps "*your very mind is Buddha*" will help. Are you smugly certain? Then perhaps "*no Buddha at all*" will burst that bubble. The **master doctor** prescribes each. In our own Zen practice, we learn to self-diagnose and apply the needed remedy. Over time, the baby grows up – crying and concepts cease, and one just lives in the reality where indeed **every ordinary mind is Buddha, and there is nothing called "Buddha" to seek** . That is the non-dual understanding Mazu guided his students toward.

Bodhidharma Pacifies the Mind – *Context:* The disciple **Huike** (慧可) stood in the snow, seeking 21.

instruction from **Bodhidharma** (the first Zen patriarch) in his cave. Huike cried, "My mind is anxious. Please, Master, *pacify my mind!* " Bodhidharma replied, "**Bring me your mind and I will pacify it for you.**" Huike thought, then said, "I have searched for my mind, but I cannot grasp it." Bodhidharma ¹¹

said, "**There – I have pacified your mind for you.**" . Upon hearing this, Huike was enlightened.

Commentary: This is the second half of the famous story mentioned in Case 4. It's a direct pointing to **mind's empty, ungraspable nature** . Huike earnestly wanted *inner peace* (who doesn't?). Bodhidharma's demand to *show the mind* forced Huike into an insight: when he looked inward for what was causing him distress – the "mind" – he realized it wasn't an entity he could locate. **The thoughts, emotions, etc., had no solid core.** Realizing this, his anxiety (*the seeking mind*) vanished. Bodhidharma's final statement confirms the **sudden**

pacification that occurs when one sees that truth: a mind you cannot even find does not need “calming” – it is originally calm in its emptiness. All of Huike’s mental struggles were like shadows chasing shadows; the moment he saw there’s **no fixed thinker behind thoughts** , a great relief dawned. This exchange became a fundamental koan in Zen: *Find the mind!* It is given to help students directly see **selflessness** . As long as we believe there’s a solid “*me*” who is anxious or seeking, we remain troubled. The instant we truly look for that “*me*” and find “*no-mind*” , a deep quiet and freedom emerge – because the **root of suffering (the illusion of an ego) is cut**. One Zen verse about this says: “*The burden is removed from your back, and you realize you were carrying nothing all along.*” Interestingly, Huike’s awakening here is complement to Bodhidharma’s earlier teaching to Emperor Wu (Case 4) where he said “vast emptiness, nothing holy” and “don’t know” – Bodhidharma taught emptiness conceptually to Wu, but Huike *experienced* emptiness by looking into his mind. This koan resonates with modern introspective practices: sometimes teachers ask, “*Where is that worry located? Show it to me.*” The student finds it is insubstantial. Thus the worry dissolves by itself. It’s a powerful method: **trace a thought or feeling**

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to its source and it vanishes – because its source is **shūnyatā (emptiness)** . Bodhidharma’s approach solved Huike’s problem not by providing something (a mantra or technique), but by pointing out the **illusory nature of the problem-maker (mind/ego)** . Once Huike realized “*no-mind*” , Bodhidharma accepted him as a successor. This became a key lineage story demonstrating *transmission outside scriptures* , using direct pointing. The phrase “*pacify my mind*” (安心, *anxin* , literally “make my heart at peace”) is commonly referenced –

many of us come to Zen seeking that same reassurance. The answer Zen gives is Bodhidharma's: **"Find the mind that is disturbed!"** When we look, we cannot find an independent entity called *mind* – only a stream of perceptions arising and ceasing. Recognizing that stream's empty nature is itself *"peace of mind."* It's notable that Huike had already shown great determination (standing in snow, even cutting off his arm in legend) – so the ground was prepared. Bodhidharma's one liner then tipped him over into realization. For us, it may take sustained practice – repeatedly observing thoughts and seeing their ungraspability – until one moment the *"true pacification"* happens. After that, the mind may still produce thoughts, but one isn't dragged by them; one knows their essence is empty, so a fundamental **okayness** pervades. As Bodhidharma said, *"it is pacified already."* This koan assures us that **inner peace is our mind's natural state** when we stop reifying our mental drama. It also exemplifies Zen's trust in the practitioner's own insight – Bodhidharma didn't pacify Huike through some external magic; he guided Huike to **self-realize emptiness** . The good news: *Your mind is pacified from the start – if you think it's not, go try to find the part that's not, and see what happens!* Huike did that, and found perfect peace.

22.

Gutei's One-Finger Zen – *Context:* (This refers back to Case 3 above, Gutei's one finger.) After Gutei's death, a nun asked Master **Tenkū** , "Gutei made a raised finger his constant teaching. I wonder, what did he realize?" Tenkū replied by **raising his own finger** . The nun said, "That's it? Nothing else?" Tenkū responded, **"What would you have me say? Understanding is not realizing ."** (From Zen lore – adapted dialogue.) *Commentary:* Gutei's simple one-finger gesture

was his embodiment of the One (non-dual truth). The nun, perhaps hoping for a philosophical explanation, is disappointed by Tenkū just imitating it. Tenkū wisely points out that any **verbal explanation** she's seeking wouldn't be the realization itself. The real answer to "what did he realize?" is grasped only by **doing as Gutei did** – raising one finger with complete awareness. In Zen tradition, successors often **demonstrate** their understanding rather than describe it. Tenkū raising a finger – the *same* action as Gutei – indicates that his realization is of the same *One Reality* as Gutei's. There is nothing extra to add. The nun's "That's it? Nothing else?" reflects the tendency to underestimate **direct transmission** and crave intellectual satisfaction. Tenkū clarifies that **intellectual understanding (linguistic or conceptual)** is a shadow compared to **actual realizing (experiential insight)**. One could paraphrase: *Realizing is not thinking*. This is a key Zen tenet: true knowing comes from *non-discursive insight*, not from analytical thought. Gutei's raising a finger conveyed the **wordless truth**. Tenkū's raising a finger conveyed the same without distortion – any further commentary would actually degrade the purity of that truth by casting it into concepts. Thus, he declines to elaborate. This little story reinforces the earlier koan about Gutei: the highest realization might appear unspectacular outwardly (just a finger in the air), yet it contains infinite depth. The nun, representing the discriminating mind, wanted more – not recognizing that **the One** has no parts; more would be less. Zen often uses this kind of scenario to **check whether a student is satisfied with the marrow or still chasing the bone**. Tenkū's admonishment echoes Zen masters like Huangbo, who said "*The Way cannot be sought by reflection; stop reflecting.*" Here, "**understanding**" means conceptual, and "**realizing**" means directly perceiving/being. Zen folk sometimes say: "*You can't eat the menu*" – the description isn't the meal. One-finger Zen is the actual *taste*. In our practice, we may understand teachings (like emptiness, impermanence) on a logical level, but not yet *realize* them in our gut.

Zen pushes us to **enact and experience** instead of remaining in theory. By raising his finger again, Tenkū effectively reenacted Gutei's enlightenment and invited the nun to drop her thinking and join in that enlightenment now. If she could drop her "but what is it really?" and simply raise a finger wholeheartedly, she might suddenly *get it* . If she clung to "Is that all?", she misses it. We don't know her fate, but likely Tenkū's message sank in eventually. For us, it's a reminder: **don't overcomplicate Zen** . Sometimes the deepest truth is expressed in the simplest gesture. Once you *get it* , even a single finger is more than enough. As Wu-men said about Gutei's one finger: "*Is your own finger any less? Go ahead, reveal the whole universe with it!*" Once realized, the most ordinary or concise action becomes a **complete expression** . Tenkū's one finger was his complete answer. No further words could equal that. So next time you find yourself intellectualizing Zen, perhaps recall Tenkū's phrase: "*Understanding is not realizing*" , and refocus on **direct practice** – maybe even hold up a finger and see if your mind can be as clear and singular as that one finger pointing upward.

23.

Layman Pang's Snowflakes (Each in Its Right Place) – *Context:* Layman **Pangyun** (740–808) was a famous Zen lay practitioner. One winter day, Pang was taking leave of Zen master **Yaoshan** . Yaoshan ordered ten monks to see him off at the temple gate. Snow was falling. Pang looked up and remarked, "**How beautiful! The snowflakes fall nowhere else .**" A monk named **Shen** couldn't resist asking, "Where *do* they fall?" Pang immediately slapped Shen. Shen protested, "Layman, that's too harsh!" Pang retorted, "**If you call yourself a Zen student, you must not fail to**

perceive the truth here!” Shen started to argue further; Pang slapped him again and said, **“You look, but you’re like a blind man; you speak, but you’re like a mute.”** (Blue Cliff Record Case 42 .)

Commentary:

31 32

Layman Pang is celebrated for expressing profound Zen insight in everyday language. His line about snowflakes – *“Good snowflakes; they don’t fall on any other place”* – is a poetic way of saying

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everything lands exactly where it belongs ; each unique occurrence is *thus* , completely itself and in accord with the universe. It’s an image of **total perfection in the ordinary** (snow falling). The clueless monk Shen, instead of smiling at the obvious truth, intellectualizes: *“Where do they fall then?”* – missing Pang’s point entirely. Pang’s slap is an attempt to **jolt Shen out of his head** . When Shen objects to the slap as “harsh,” Pang chides him for wearing the name of Zen student but not *seeing* the reality (truth) that Pang pointed to with his statement. Shen still doesn’t get it and likely starts overthinking or complaining – Pang slaps him again, saying he has eyes but doesn’t *see* , a tongue but doesn’t *speak* truth. This is a rather combative koan, but typical of Pang’s eccentric Zen style. The main teaching: **Thusness** – the snow falls exactly where it falls. In other words, *each moment is complete*. There is nowhere else it should be. *Each snowflake falls in its appropriate place*. This is sometimes quoted in Zen commentary to illustrate **Tathatā** (suchness) or **Dharma positions** (each thing fulfilling its Dharma perfectly). Pang’s marveling at snow is a model of *mindful presence and acceptance* – he’s delighted that reality is exactly as it is and not otherwise. *“Nowhere else”* could also imply **now-here** – fully present. Shen’s response shows the analytical mind that always asks *“why?”* *“explain!”* or tries to pin down meaning, thereby losing the direct experience. That’s why Pang bops him.

Interestingly, this was Pang's farewell as he departed – a final teaching to the monks: *“Open your eyes! Don't think – see the suchness.”* The case's resolution has Pang performing the superior understanding and poor Shen missing it despite being a “Zen student.” It warns all Zen aspirants not to be like Shen – chasing conceptual rabbits while snow falls silently all around. After Pang left, Yaoshan commented, *“Good snowflakes indeed!”* appreciating Pang's wisdom. Wumen's verse on this case says, *“The flake falls – see them all over the universe; / each one in the whole of time, each exactly so. / If one still doubts this, they haunt old Pang's words in vain.”* The verse celebrates that when one sees truth like Pang did, **each particular (snowflake) contains the whole** and is at the right place/

time. The interplay between Pang and Shen also underscores that *saying a Zen truth plainly isn't enough; the listener must have ears to hear*. Pang's truth is simple – but Shen's mind complicated it. Sometimes a physical intervention (slap) might be more effective than elegant words, because it might *stop* the analytic mind. Possibly after the second slap, poor Shen got the message (it's not recorded, but one would hope he had some insight or at least learned to shut up). For us, Layman Pang's exclamation is a wonderful **mindfulness pointer** : *“Good snowflakes – they fall nowhere else!”* can serve as a mantra to remind us that **this moment is as it should be** . Instead of mentally escaping or questioning it, fully inhabit it. Realize that it truly falls *now-here* , and nowhere else – meaning *this* is the only reality happening. To live like that is to be in harmony with the Way. Zen practice fosters that recognition so that eventually, like Pang, you might smile at the falling snow (or rain, or leaves, or circumstances of your life) and think, *“Good _____ – it lands just where it lands.”* That is profound equanimity and joy in thusness.

24.

Nansen's "Mind Is Not Buddha" – *Context:* We've seen Mazu's teachings of "Mind is Buddha" and later "No mind, no Buddha." His disciple **Nansen** (748–835) similarly gave seemingly conflicting answers depending on the student. One time, a monk asked Nansen, "What is *the true Buddha* ?" Nansen answered, **"It's not mind, it's not Buddha, it's not a thing."** (Mumonkan Case 27 .)

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Commentary: This striking negation – "*no mind, no Buddha, no things*" – is in line with "*no mind, no Buddha*" but adds "*no thing*." Nansen is shutting down any conceptual avenue: **Buddha is not any "thing" you can point to – neither an entity called mind, nor the concept of Buddha, nor any particular object.** By sweeping away mind, Buddha, and phenomena, Nansen left the monk's mind in utter emptiness. This is a direct pointing to the **inconceivable reality** beyond attributes. It's said upon hearing this, the monk "*attained the source*." Wumen's commentary praises Nansen: "*Old Nansen gave away his treasure-words too generously. He truly removed the skin, flesh, and bones of the student all at once!*" Indeed, Nansen's triple negation peels away layers of attachment: first to *subjective mind* , second to *enlightened ideal (Buddha)* , third to *objective existence* . Nothing remains – which is exactly the **source** (the "*great void*" as Bodhidharma said). Only from that no-ground can one realize the ground of being. Nansen's response is thus an extremely potent "*gateless barrier*" – if the monk's mind clings to any concept at all, he'll find it blocked. If he fully lets go, he plunges into the truth. This teaching was not meant for beginners (they might misunderstand as nihilism). It was for a mature monk ready to experience **sunyata** . It's

essentially a restatement of Prajnaparamita Sutra wisdom: “*no mind (no thought or perception has inherent nature), no Buddha (even enlightenment is empty), no thing (all dharmas are empty).*” When that is genuinely seen, the **true Buddha** reveals itself – not as an object, but as the boundless **Dharmakaya** (reality body) present everywhere and nowhere. The monk’s question “What is the true Buddha?” implies maybe he had already heard “mind is Buddha” from others and wasn’t satisfied; Nansen gave him the ultimate answer by denying all possible answers. This approach can help us when we fixate on any idea of truth. The path of “**neti neti**” (not this, not that) clears out false identifications, leaving “*no thing*” to hold onto – which ironically is the entrance to *everything* . In practice, Wumen warns us not to conceptualize Nansen’s words either. It’s something to *experience* : he says “*if you realize what Nansen meant, you will wear Buddha’s robe, eat Buddha’s food, speak Buddha’s words, and you yourself are Buddha!*” That is, once you truly awaken to the emptiness of mind, Buddha, and things, you *embody* Buddha in every aspect of life, without needing the label. If you only intellectualize “no mind, no Buddha,” you’re left in a void of understanding, which is not liberating. So this koan tests whether one can pass beyond both **eternalist** views (believing in inherent mind or Buddha) and **nihilist** views (believing in nothing at all). The correct understanding is to see **empty thusness** – then when asked “What is true Buddha?” you might simply smile, or perhaps raise a finger (since once you know “no thing,” every *thing* can

manifest Buddha without contradiction). Nansen’s radical teaching informs Zen even now: it encourages us to drop any *spiritual* clinging too. If you have a strong notion “Buddha-nature is X” – Nansen says drop it. In that dropping, the living Buddha-nature *may manifest itself* .

In summary, **not mind, not Buddha, not thing** is a powerful pointer to the **Buddha beyond Buddha** – the reality that cannot be pinned by those names, but which shines when those names are let go.

The Sound of Raindrops – *Context:* One evening, Zen master **Qingyuan (Seiryō)** asked a monk,

25.

“What is that sound outside?” The monk said, “Raindrops.” Qingyuan said, **“All is the sound of raindrops.”** Upon hearing this, the monk had great enlightenment. *Commentary:* This gentle koan is reminiscent of Layman Pang’s snow koan. The master’s question draws the student’s attention to the immediate environment – *listen!* The monk identifies it: rain. The master’s reply – *“All is the sound of raindrops”* – is a poetic expression of **unity** or **complete immersion**. In that moment of deep listening, *everything* (“all”) is just that sound. There is no separation between listener and rain, between myriad forms – it’s all one reality, manifesting as the sound of rain. This triggered the monk’s enlightenment experience: he realized **One Taste** – the truth that **each phenomenon is complete and all-pervading** when experienced with total presence. It might also imply **“Everything returns to the One”** (all things dissolve into the sound), and the One expresses as all things (the rain sound pervades everything). Many Zen stories involve a sudden awakening upon a sound – a pebble hitting bamboo, a tile breaking, etc. Here, the master skillfully used a natural sound combined with a pointer phrase to guide the monk to realization. “All is the sound of raindrops” is simple yet profound: it invites the student to **lose the boundaries** – to let the rain’s patter fill his consciousness until there is nothing else. In that moment, the mind is

undivided: *just hearing* . The koan is essentially about **suchness and oneness** . The monk's initial answer "raindrops" shows conceptual knowing – he labels the sound correctly. But perhaps he still feels a self listening to rain *over there* . The master's follow-up dissolves that duality by saying, in effect, **that is everything** right now. This could also be seen as saying **the Dharma is omnipresent** – it's pouring down in the sound of rain. The monk awakened, meaning he probably had a direct experience of **non-dual awareness** where indeed everything was just *thus*. After enlightenment, any sound is the sound of rain, any sight is Buddha's face, etc. This koan encourages us to similarly open our senses completely. In practice, next time it rains, one might recall: "*All is the sound of raindrops.*" Let the mind be saturated by the sound. Or if in city noise, "*All is the sound of traffic.*" It's a method of **total mindfulness** that leads to an insight of unity. One Zen poem goes: "*In heaven and earth I alone am honored – / hearing the rain, I am thoroughly wet.*" The first part is a line from the Buddha, the second part is the Zen twist: when self disappears, one is intimately one with the rain. The "thoroughly wet" is like saying "all is raindrops." Similarly, after Layman Pang's enlightenment, he wrote: "*Miraculous, wonder – I chop wood, carry water... when tired I stretch out in my lazy body; the stream flows, the wind blows, and I am at peace.*" Pang's "*the stream flows*" is analogous to "*all is raindrops*" – meaning he's at one with the flowing current of life. This gentle koan is easier to appreciate than some of the harsher ones. It invites us directly into **samadhi** (oneness). Yet, as always, we must be careful not to cling to the *concept* "All is X" as a philosophy. It's about an experience. Wumen comments: "*If you can fully immerse in 'all is sound of rain', you realize the truth. If not, you still have sense of self around.*" The verse might say: "*When fully absorbed, nothing stands outside the rain; / awakened by a singular sound, one comprehends the Whole.*" Another interesting aspect: Qingyuan (Seiryō) is known in Zen history for his later saying, "*Before I studied Zen, mountains were*

mountains, rivers were rivers. While deeply studying Zen, mountains were not mountains, rivers not rivers. After enlightenment, mountains are just mountains, rivers just rivers.” His statement “All is the sound of raindrops” could be seen as that middle stage (things lost their independent form into oneness). But the monk’s later enlightenment let him eventually see “rain is just rain” again – which is actually the same thing but now appreciated without any conceptual fuss. In summary, this koan’s teaching is: **merge with reality intimately and realize the One Taste** . Doing so, you realize that in each particular **all universals are present** – each raindrop rings with the sound of truth, making the whole universe ring. When you hear that, you yourself become the Dharma. Nothing remains but the gentle patter of enlightenment falling everywhere .

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